Variations on "I Got Rhythm"

Transcription For PIANO SOLO

GEORGE GERSHWIN

PREFACE

The genesis of the song "I Got Rhythm" began with Treasure Girl (1928) as a slow number and ultimately found its way into Girl Crazy (1930) as the song we know today.

George Gershwin was rich and successful and two years away from his goal of finding a composition teacher who would help him expand his compositional skills. Over a period of time, he had been turned down by Nadia Boulanger, Maurice Ravel, and Alexander Glazunov, respectively. According to Edward Jablonski in his book George Gershwin: A Biography (Doubleday 1987), Gershwin finally connected with Josef Schillinger in 1932 and studied with him until 1936. In Mr. Jablonski's words: "In short, the [Schillinger] system was strong on technique, weak on originality (or that elusive thing, 'inspiration'; if the gift is missing, not all mathematics in the world is a substitute)."

George Gershwin, however, lacked neither inspiration nor originality, but Schillinger's methodology of creating a mathematical grid as the basis of composition seemed to satisfy Gershwin's desire to formalize his creative genius within a structured framework. He was clearly preparing himself for a future in serious modern composition. "Cuban Overture", "I Got Rhythm Variations", "Second Rhapsody", "Porgy and Bess" and his final shows, including the movie score for Shall We Dance, were all composed during this period.

Sometime in 1933, Gershwin had begun clearing his schedule in anticipation of his forthcoming opera Porgy and Bess. He concurrently signed a contract for a weekly radio broadcast he would host, and also arranged for a cross-country concert tour in celebration of the tenth anniversary of his "Rhapsody in Blue". His notion of creating for himself a window of time seems remarkable, but intense schedules were nothing new for Gershwin and this spate of activity was no exception, save a brief respite in Palm Beach, Florida. There he dashed off his "I Got Rhythm Variations" (almost as an afterthought). Perhaps he had realized there was a dearth of his own classical material for his concert tour. How fortuitous for us!

In one of his radio broadcasts, on February 19, 1934, Gershwin unassumingly describes his new piece. He relates to his radio audience that the work beings quietly, with the orchestra artlessly introducing the four-note theme. When the piano finally enters, it, too, articulates the theme simply. He goes on to say that in the first variation, the piano plays a complicated rhythmic pattern while the orchestra plays the theme. This variation is perky and quirky. Next comes "Valse Triste" (Gershwin's title in his manuscript). It moves along at a waltz tempo, but it is devoid of the romantic elements found in most waltzes and is rather dissonant as the violins squeal with glissandos, forging a certain ersatz pathos. The third variation imitates Chinese flutes played out of tune "as they always are" according to George. In describing his fourth variation, Gershwin does not refer to it during the radio broadcast as a jazz variation. He tells us that the melody is played upside down by....

the left hand while the right hand plays it straight "on the theory: never let one hand know what the other is doing". The finale follows. It is complicated and energetic, and interestingly, within its closing moments one hears for the first time a new voice inhabiting the end of the piece. It appears twice, gently escorting the departing tune in its final iterations. This secondary theme provides a quasi-poignant goodbye to the listener before it runs away from us with a wink and a bang!

Alicia Zizzo on the topic of "I Got Rhythm"

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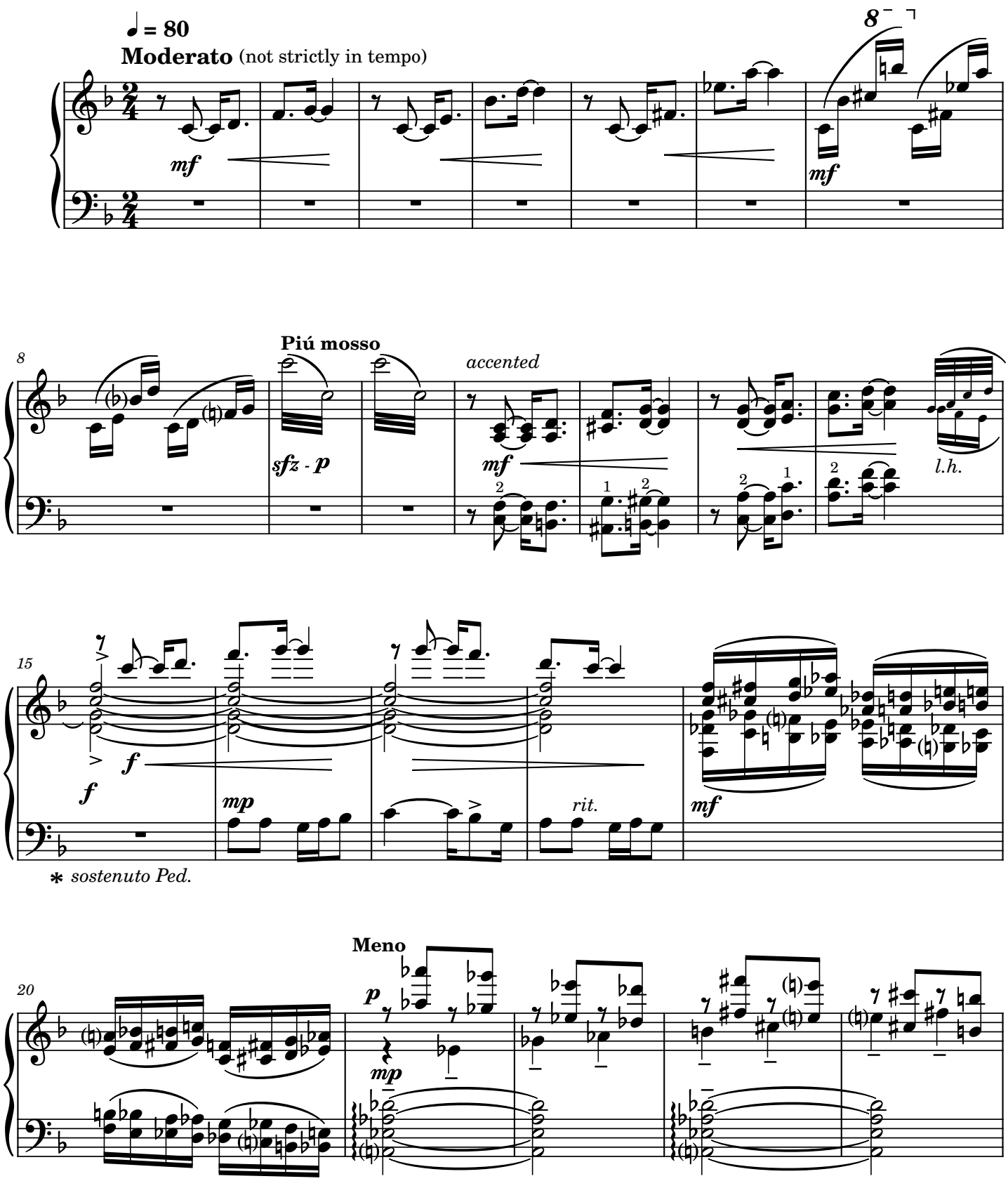
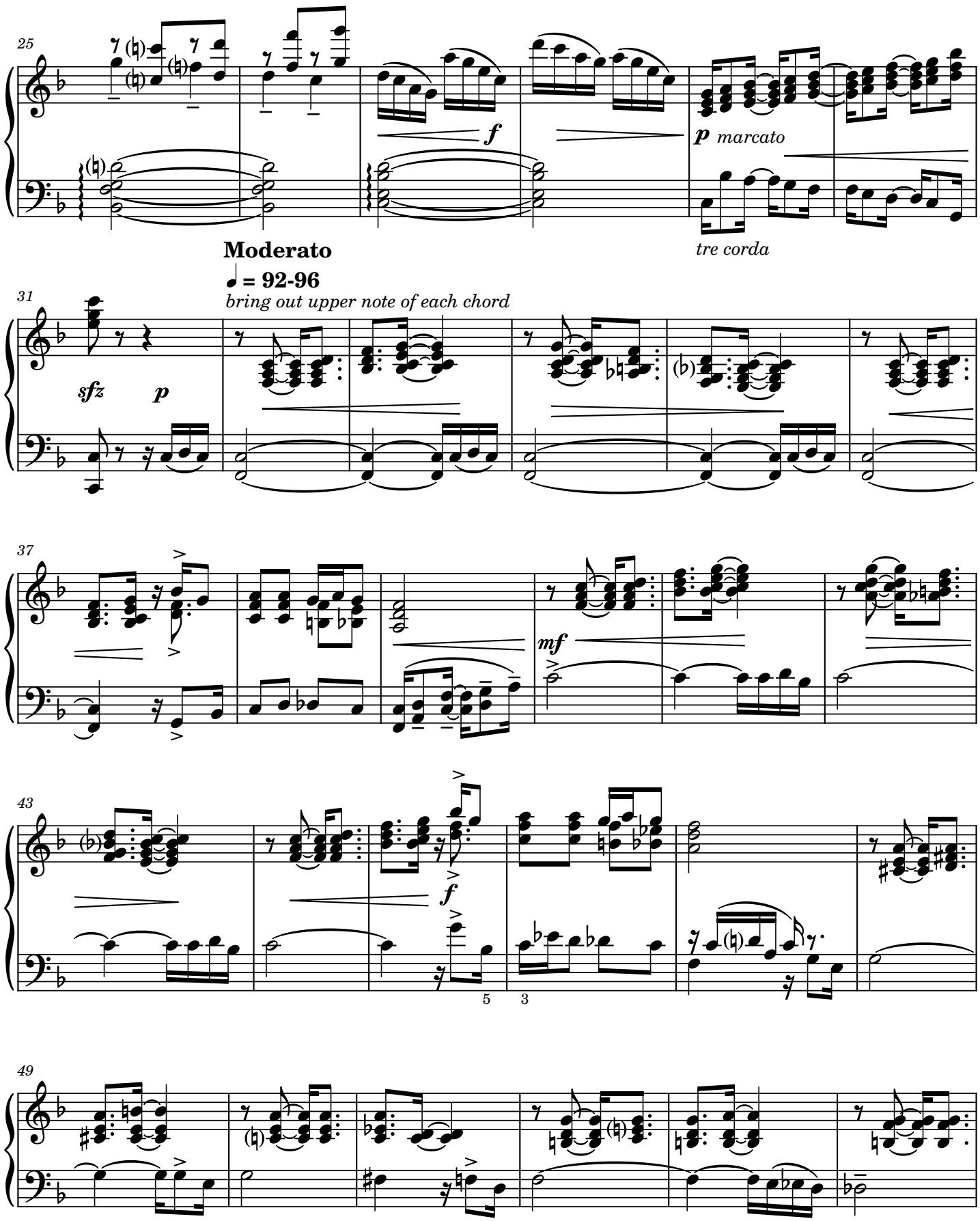
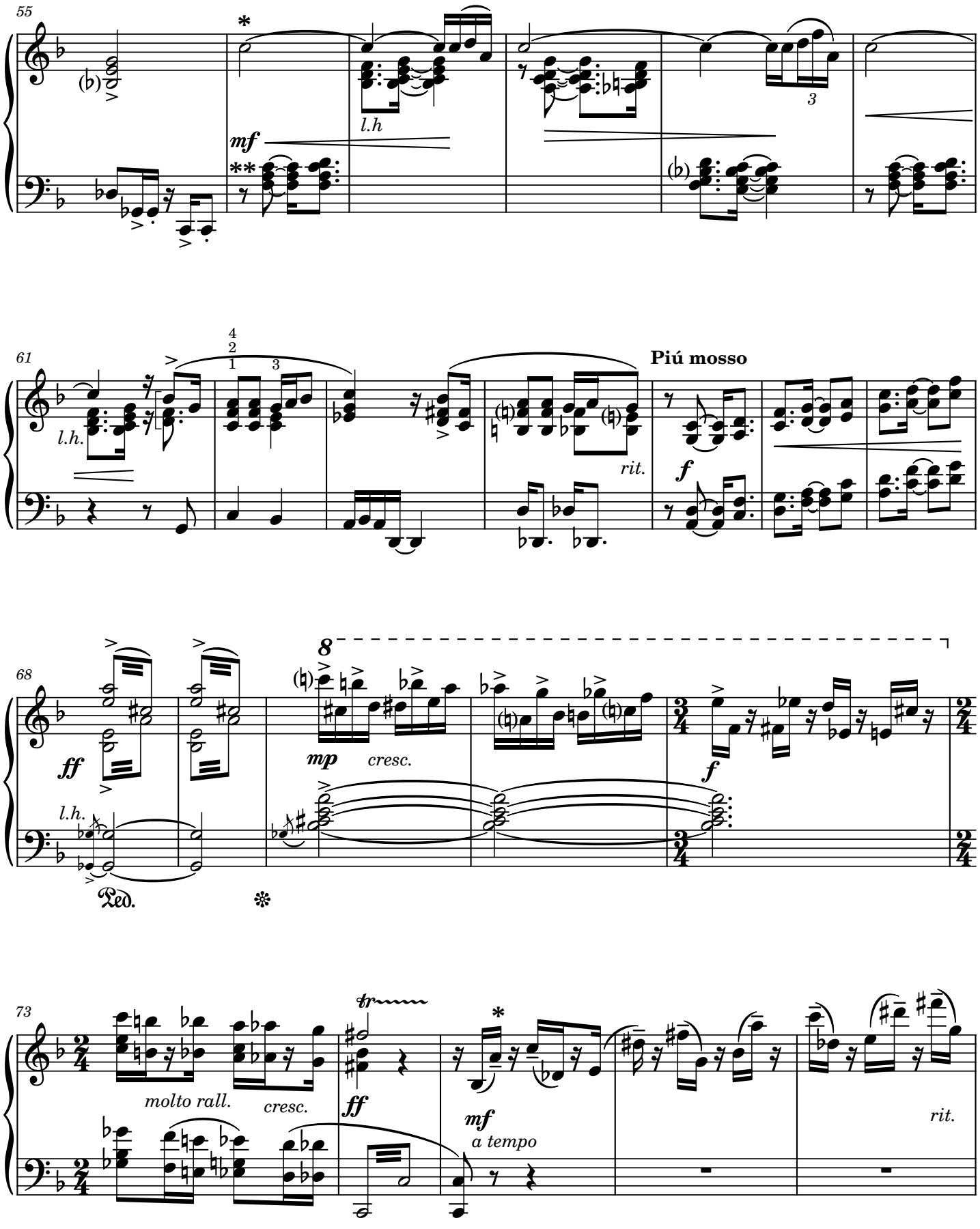
To
My Brother Ira

Art credit Al Hirschfeld

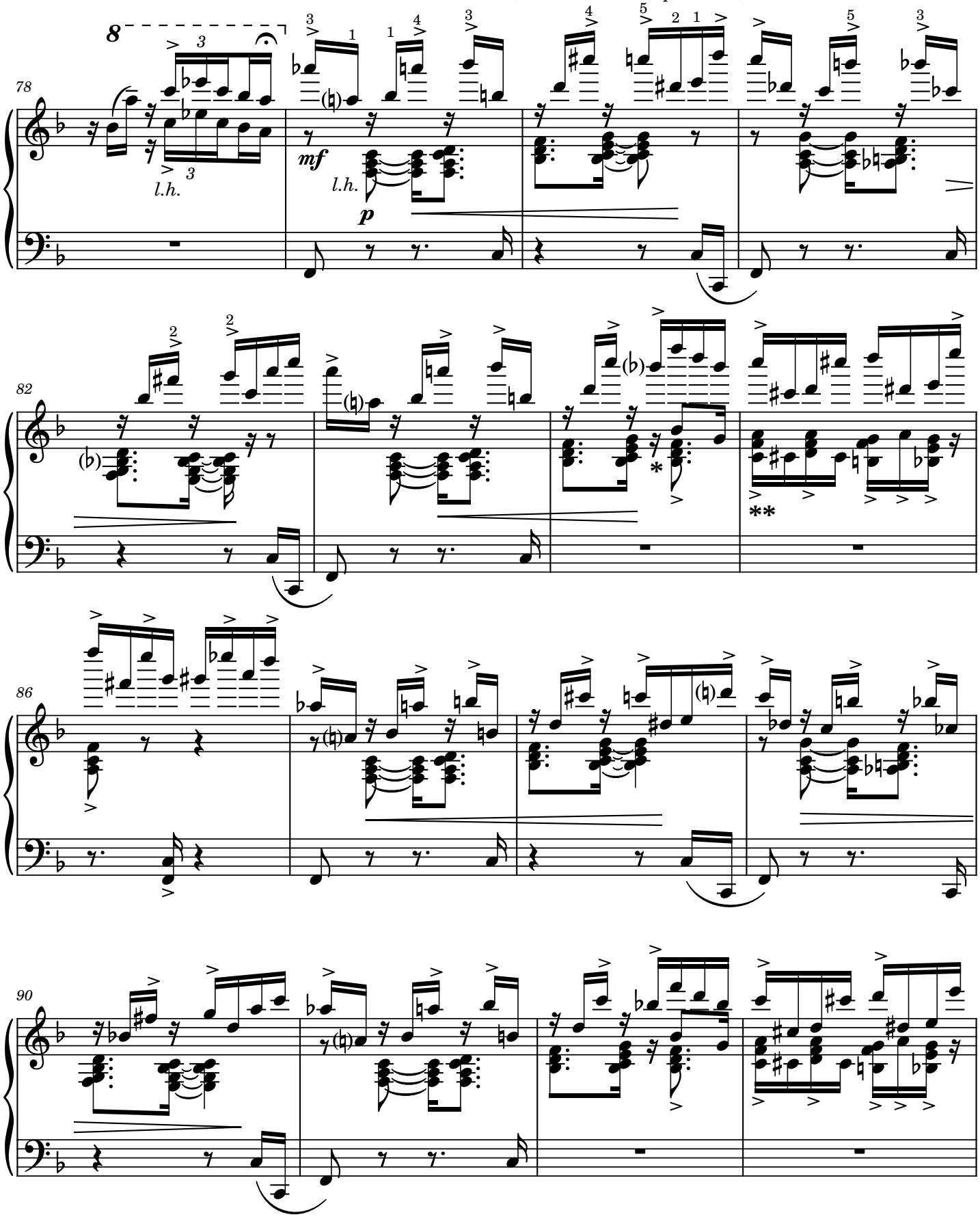
"I GOT RHYTHM" VARIATIONS

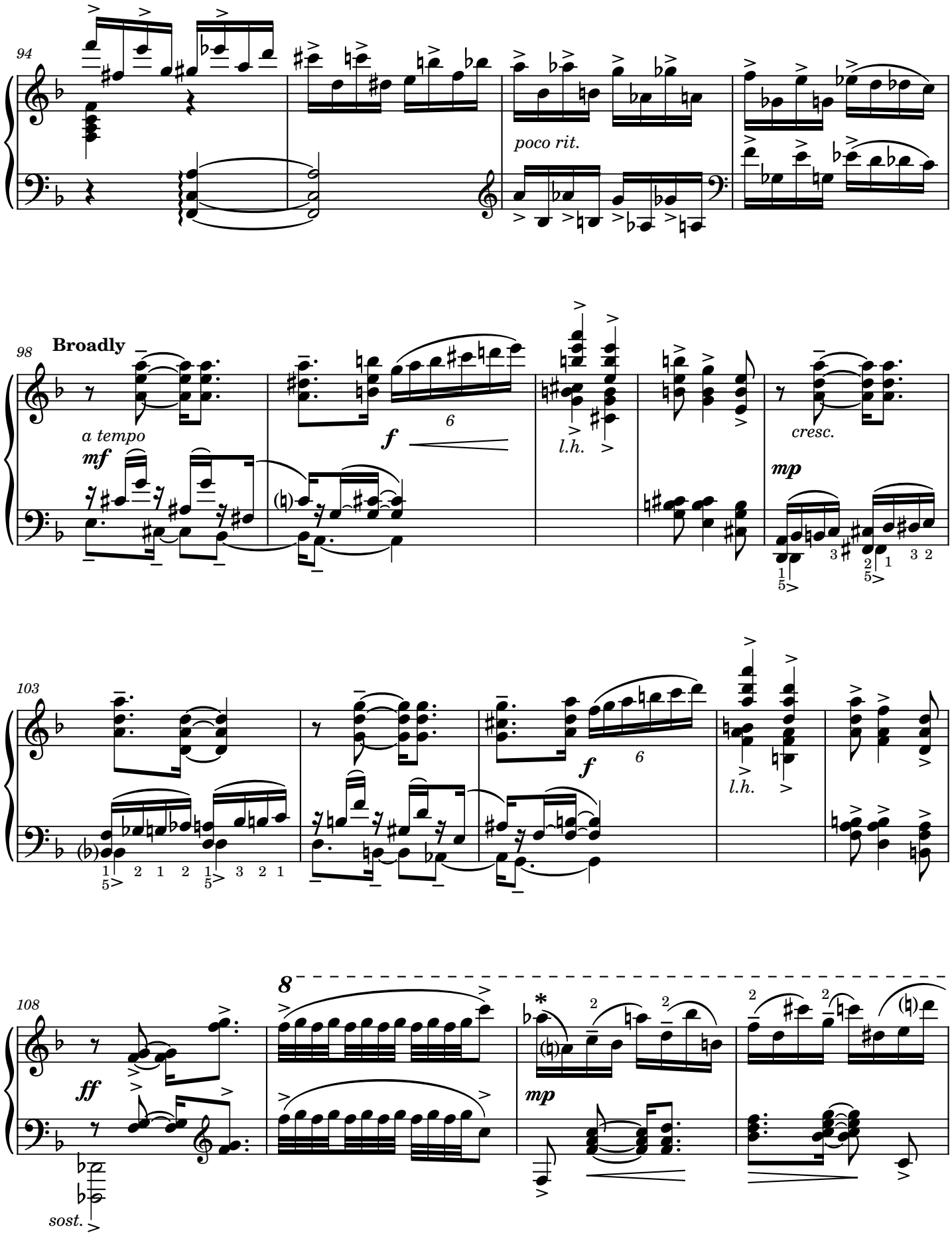
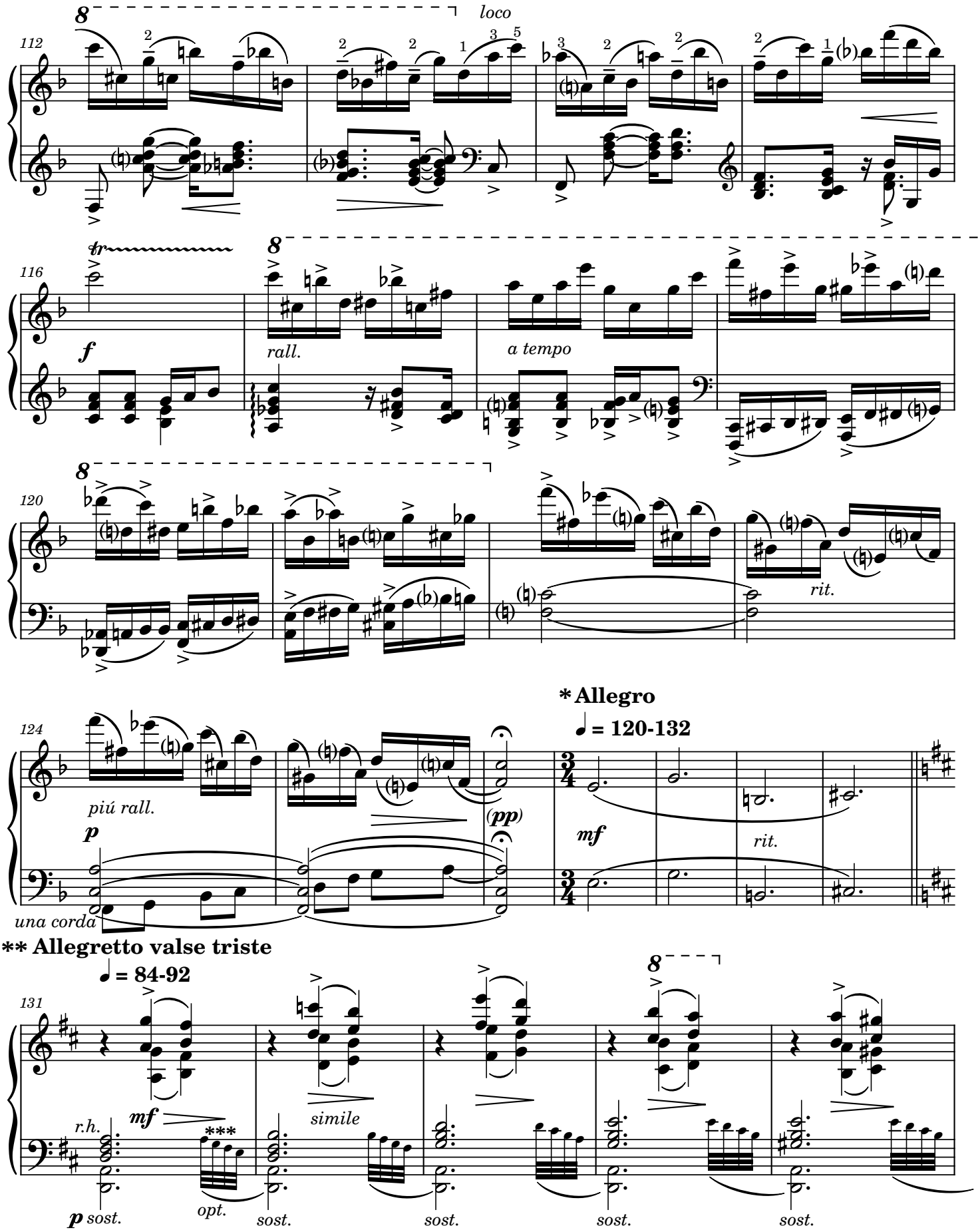
for Solo Piano

IRA/GEORGE GERSHWIN

***Catch only the chord with sost. pedal.**

25
f
p marcato
tre corda
Moderato
♩ = 92-96
bring out upper note of each chord
31
sfz
p
37
mf
43
f
5
3
49

*Cross over is optional.

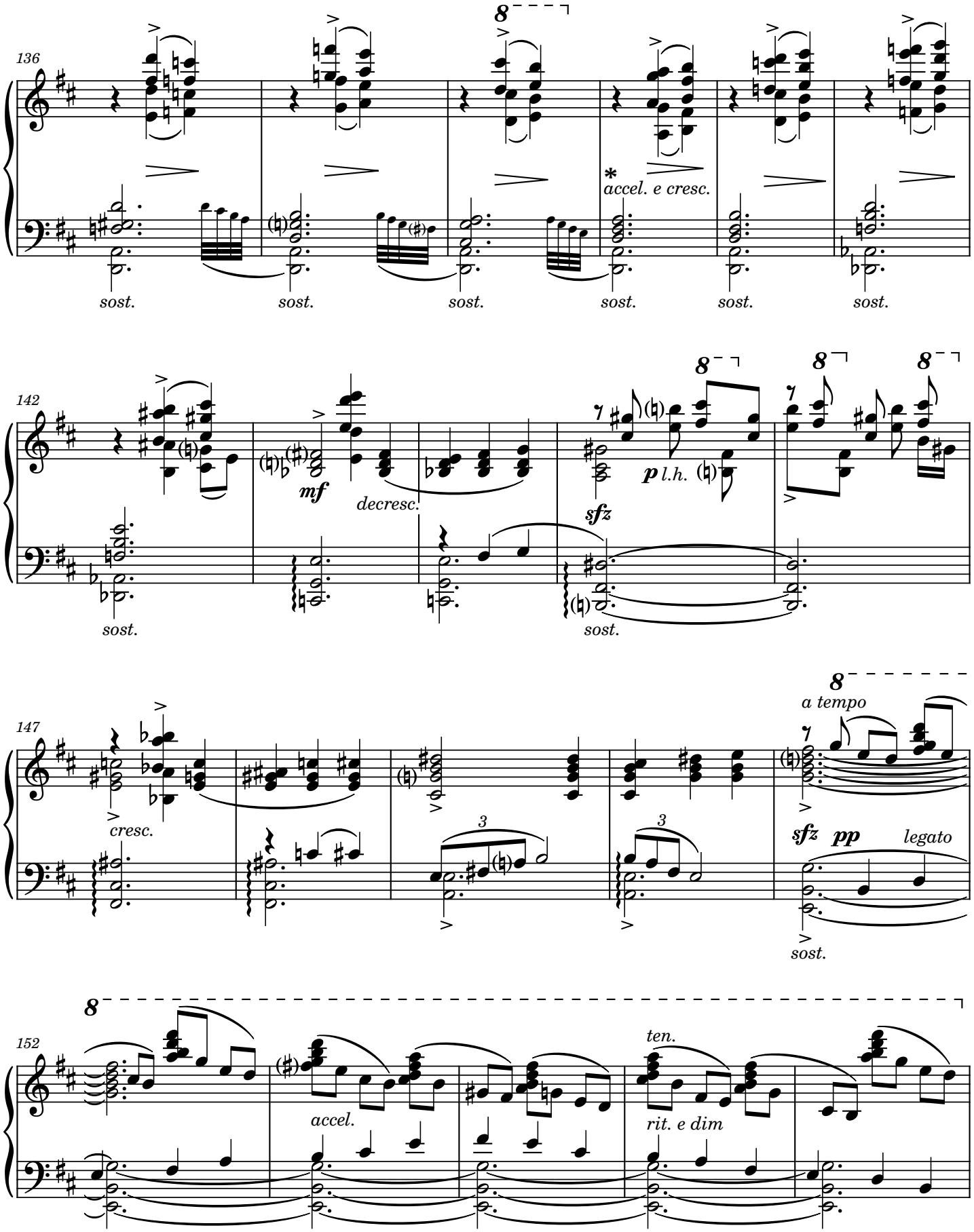
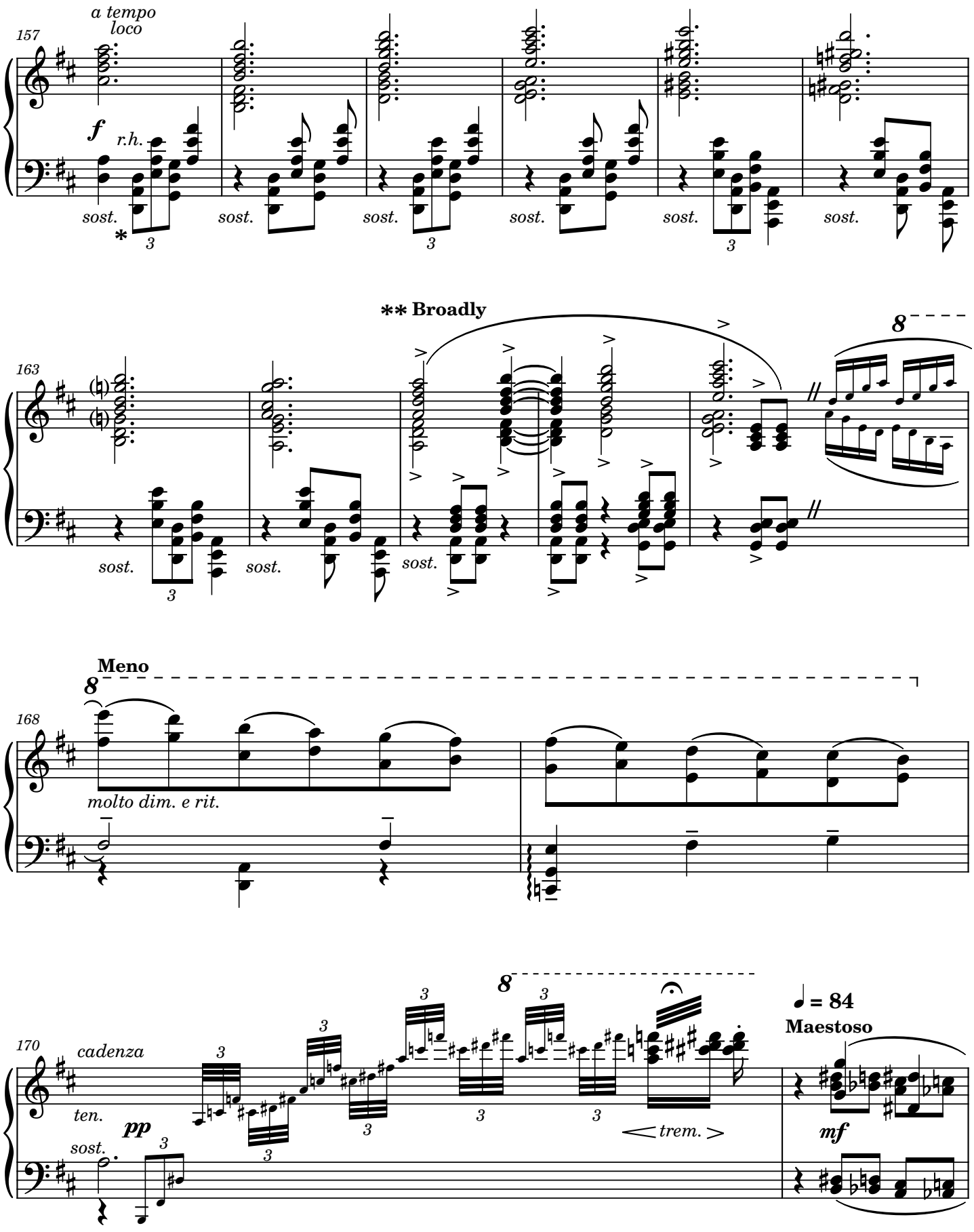
**Bring out upper note.

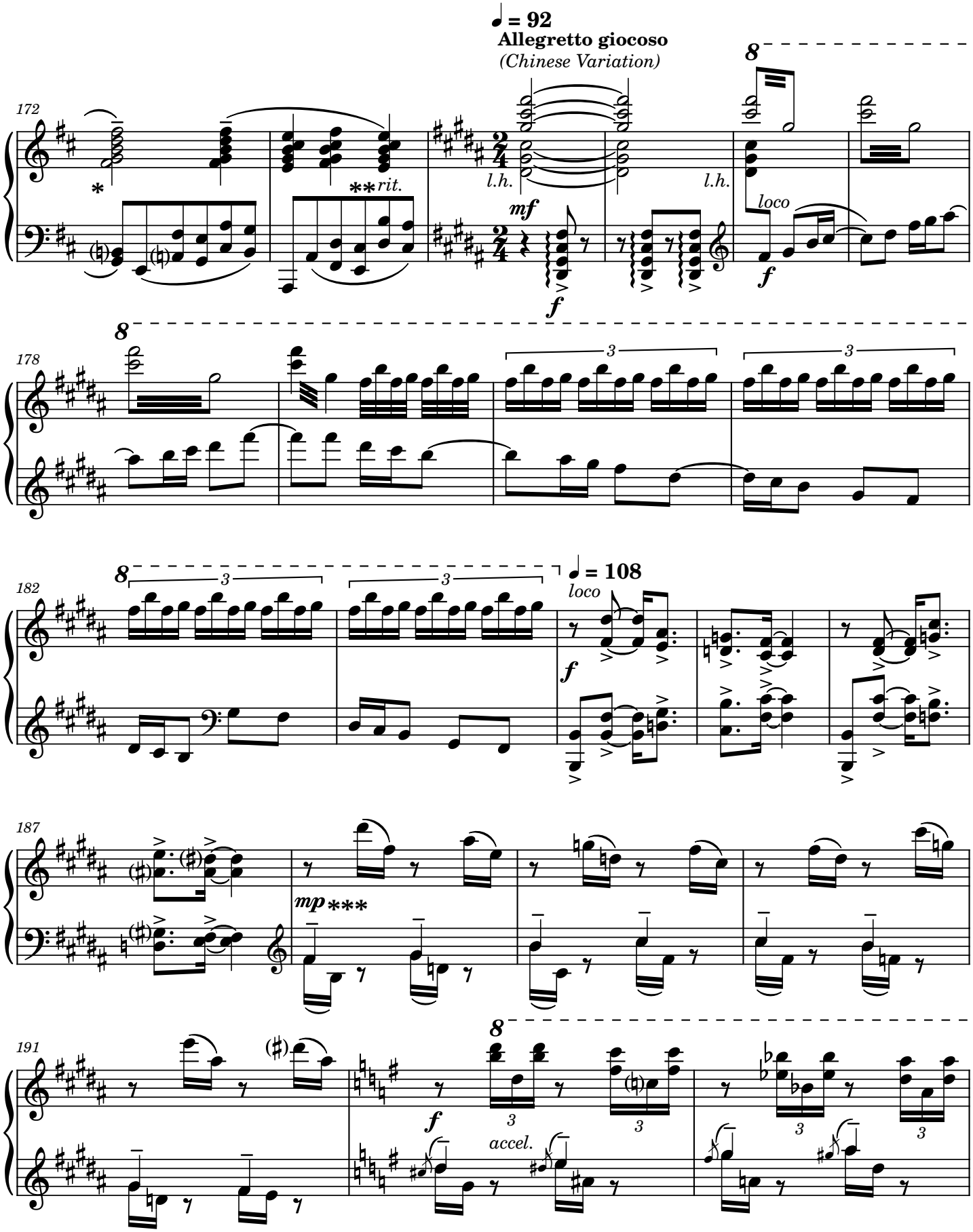
***Tenuto marks are editor's suggestion.

Moderato ♩ **= 92-96** *(with metronomic precision)*

***Easier: Omit low B-flat.**

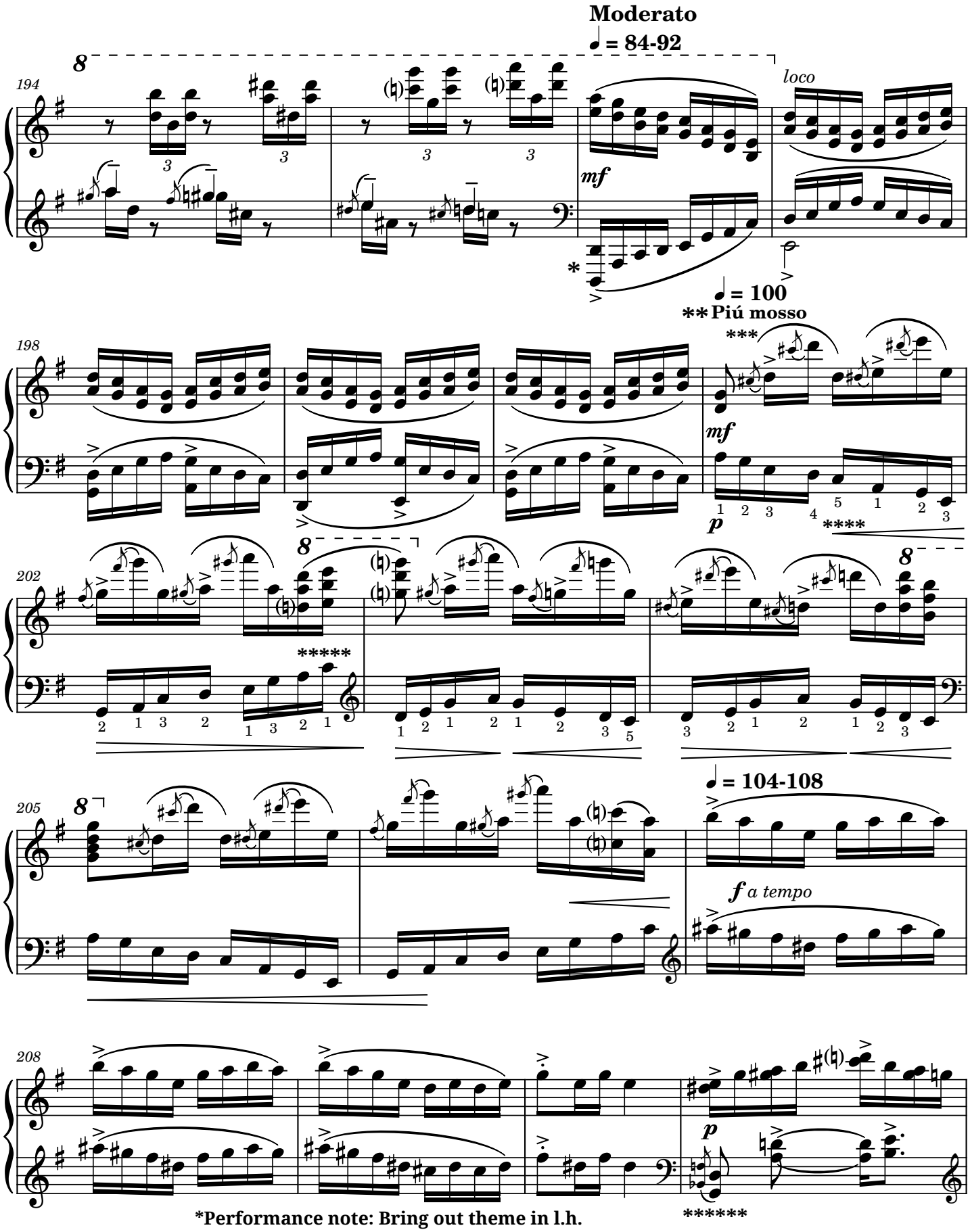
****Easier: Play chords as eighth notes, eliminating sixteenth notes.**

*Slurs not in original score.

*Vivace in 2 piano edition, Allegro in original score.

**Quarter note=108 in original score, quarter note=120 in 2 piano edition.

***Gliss. in original score performed by violins 8va and 15ma.

***Accel. is editor's suggestion.**

***Performance note: Pedal triplets (every other measure).**

****Resoluto in 2 piano edition.**

*Easier: omit bottom note of chords.

**Rit. not in original score.

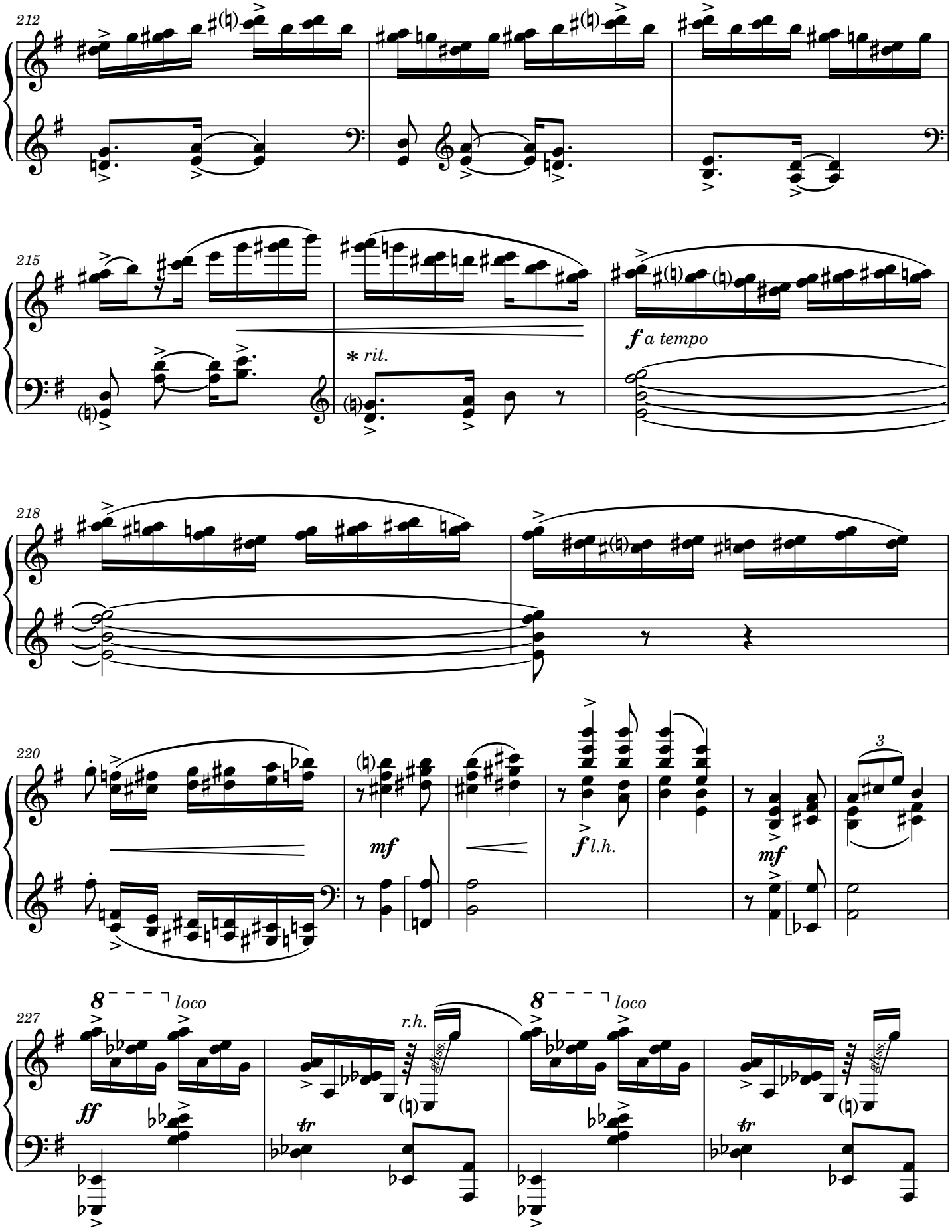
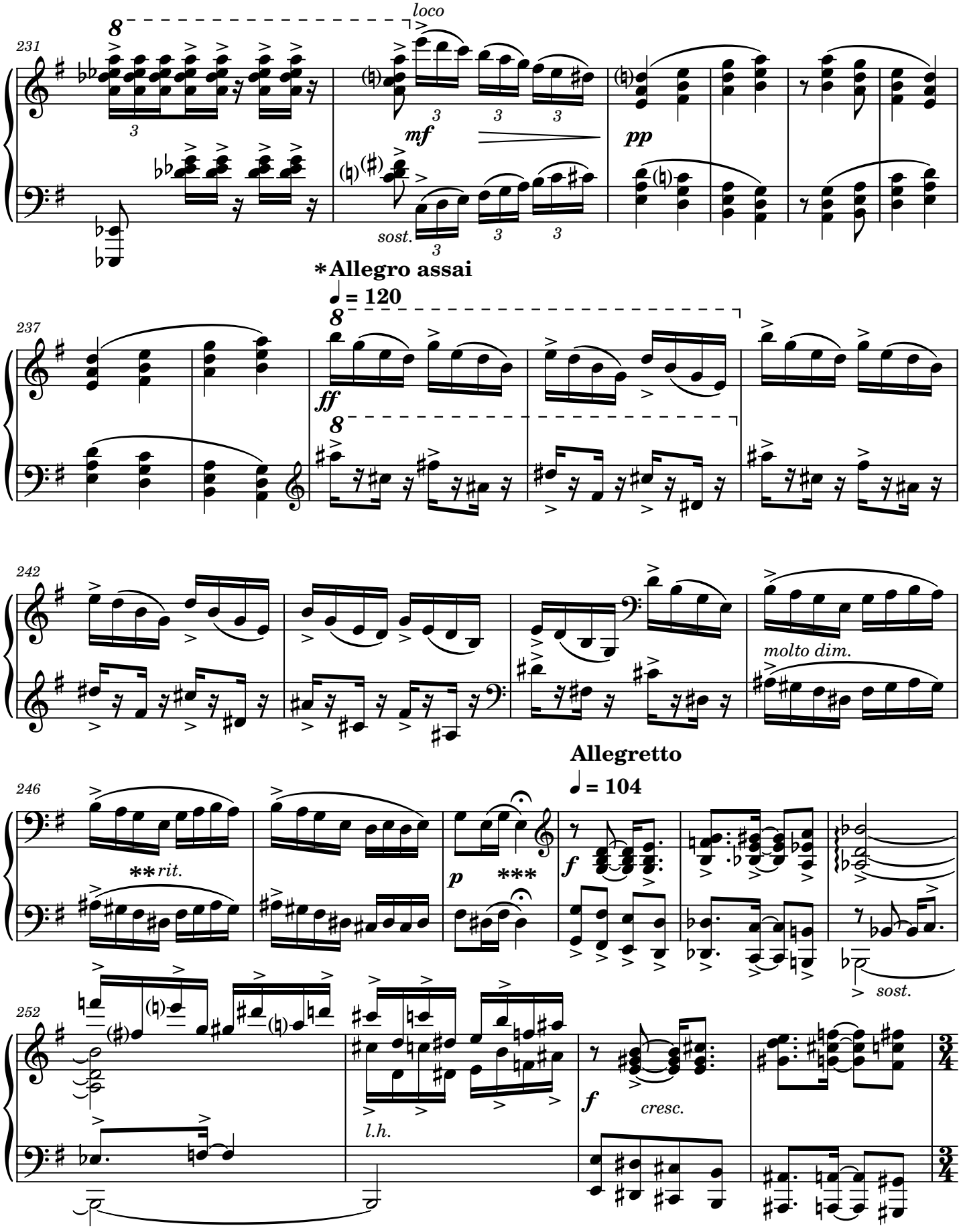
***Mezzo forte in manuscript.

*Performance note: Bring out theme in l.h.

**Suggested tempo.

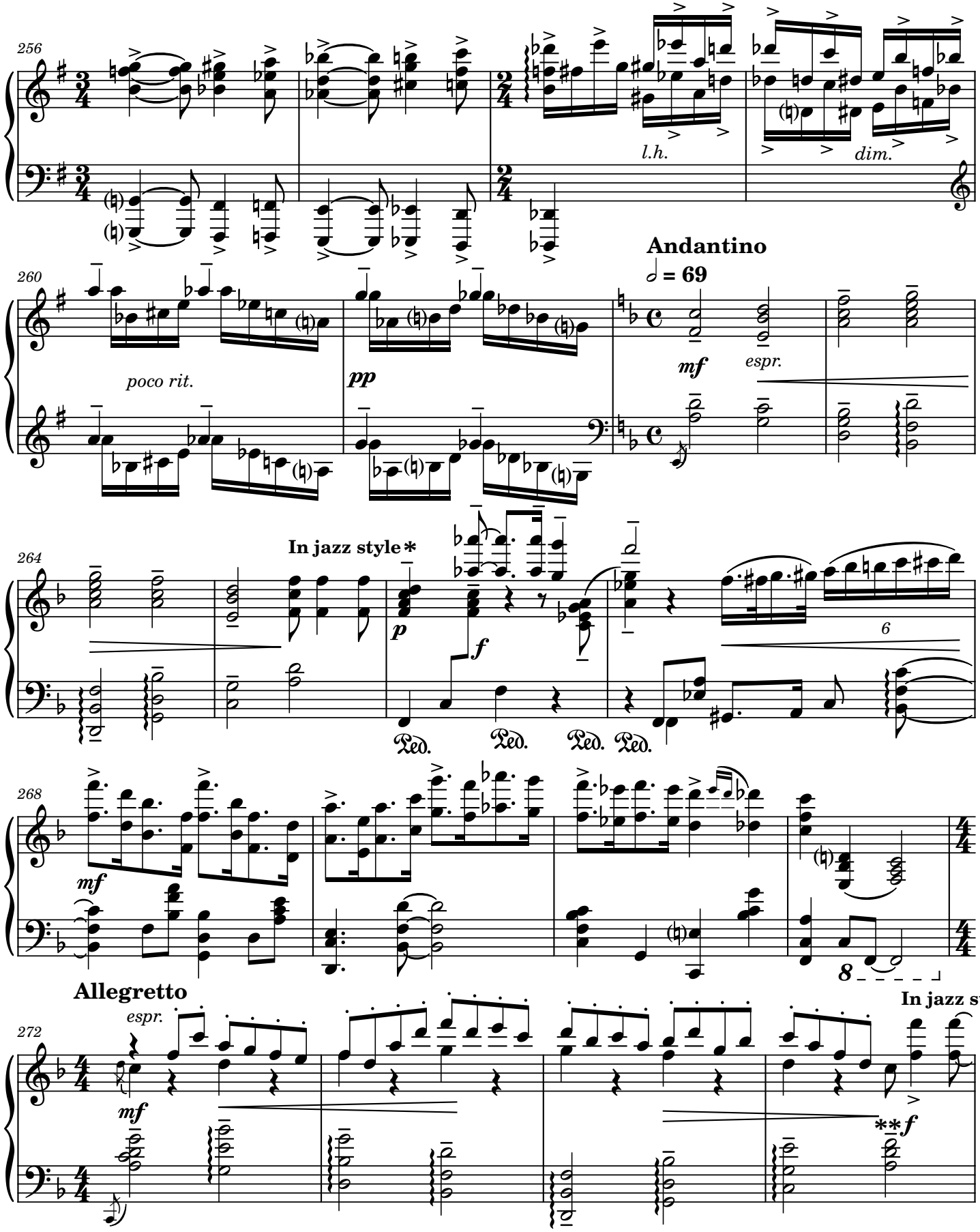
***Slurs not in original manuscript.

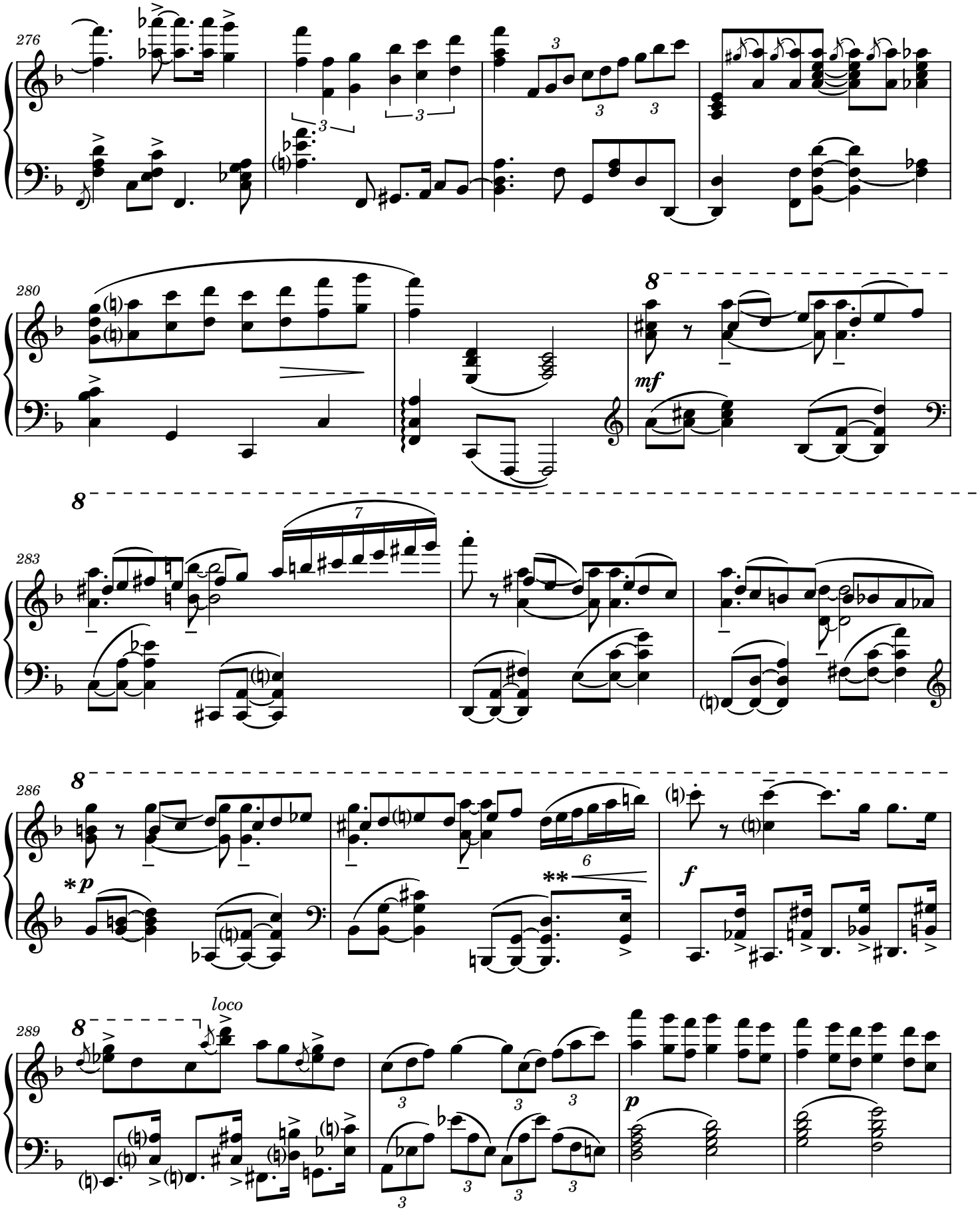
****l.h. crescendos/decrescendos optional (orchestral dynamics).

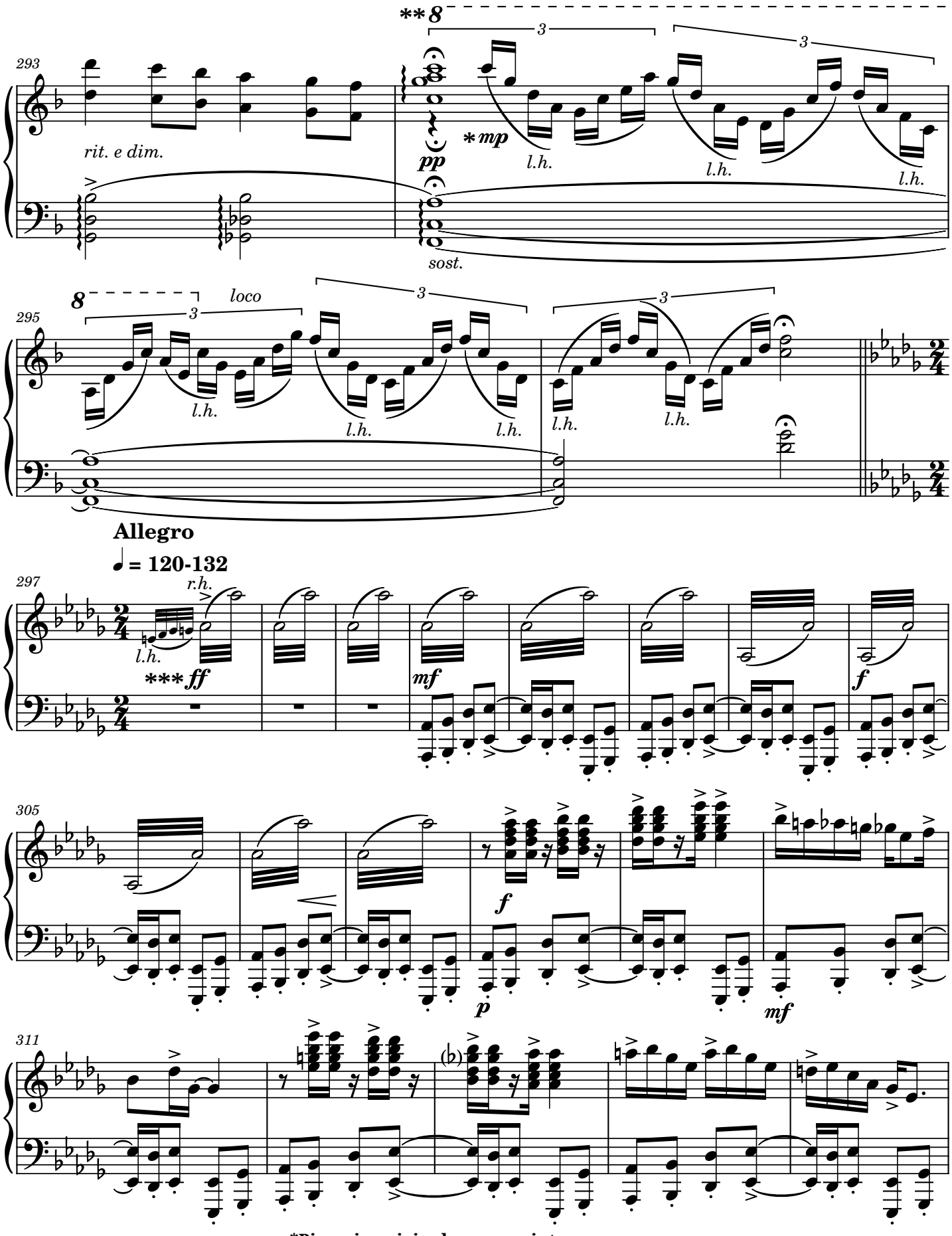
*****Easier: Omit middle note.

******Optional grace notes.

*Optional rit.

*Quarter note=136 in original score.

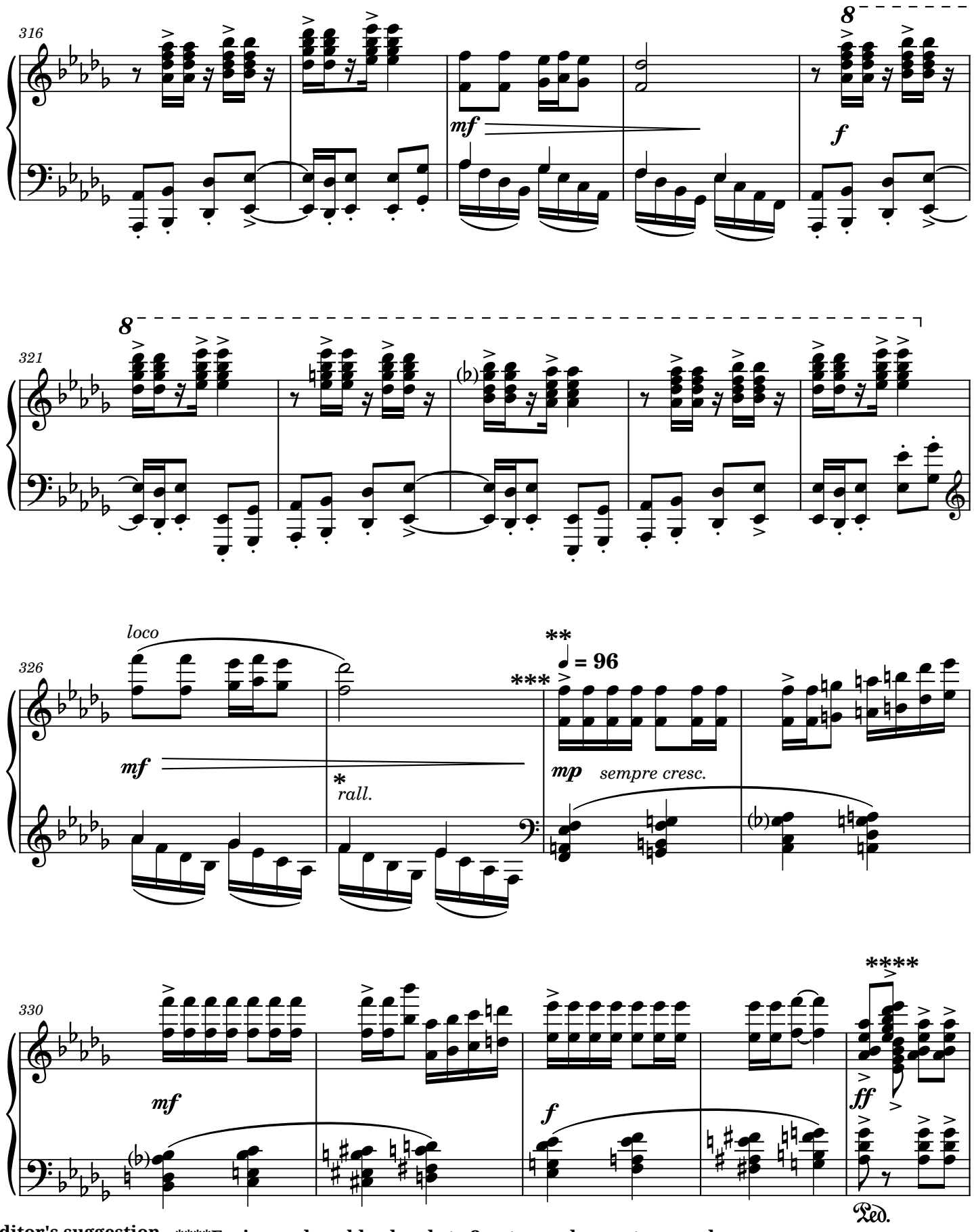
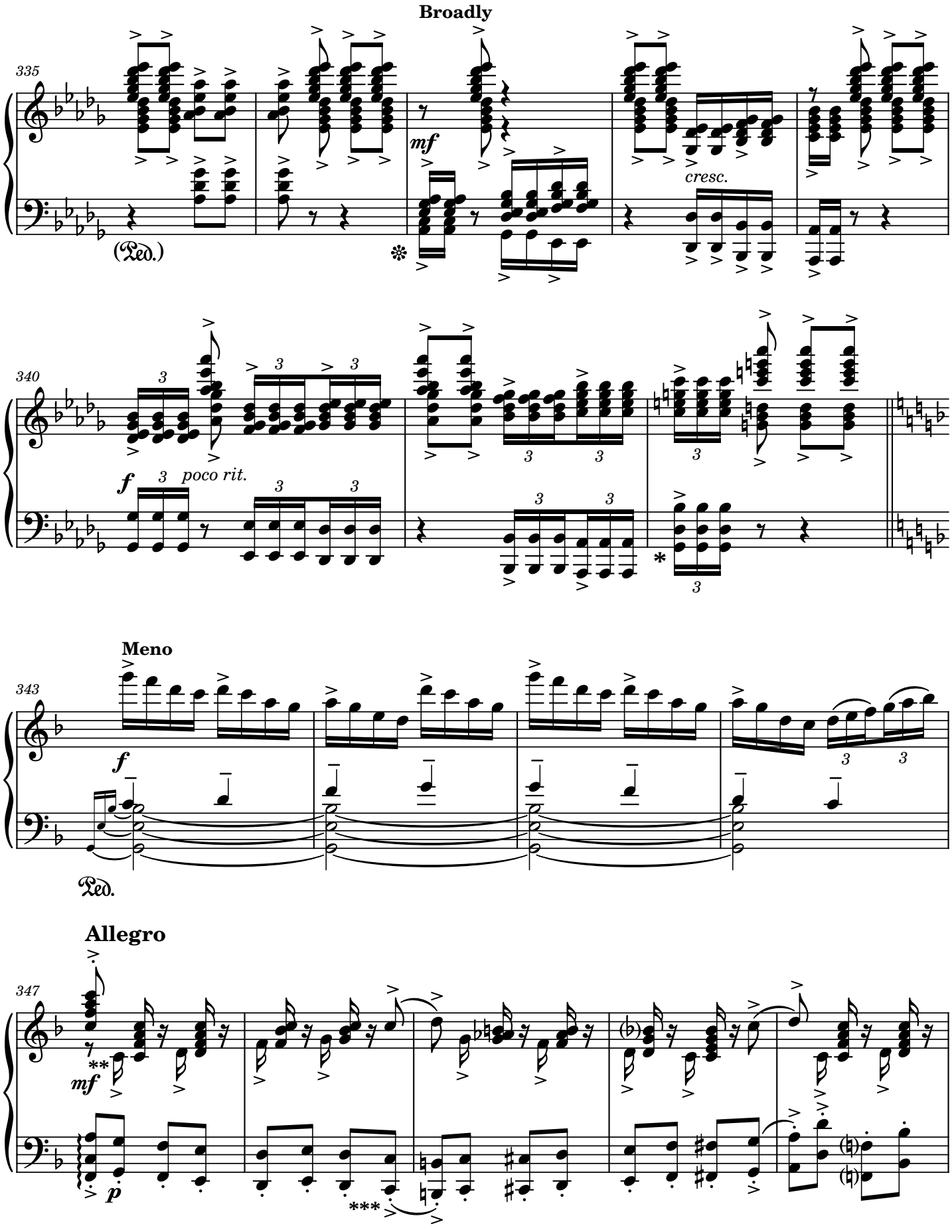
**Optional rit. (Original score).

***Optional fermata (not in original score).

*Editor's note: This section is improvised with a "walking" bass.

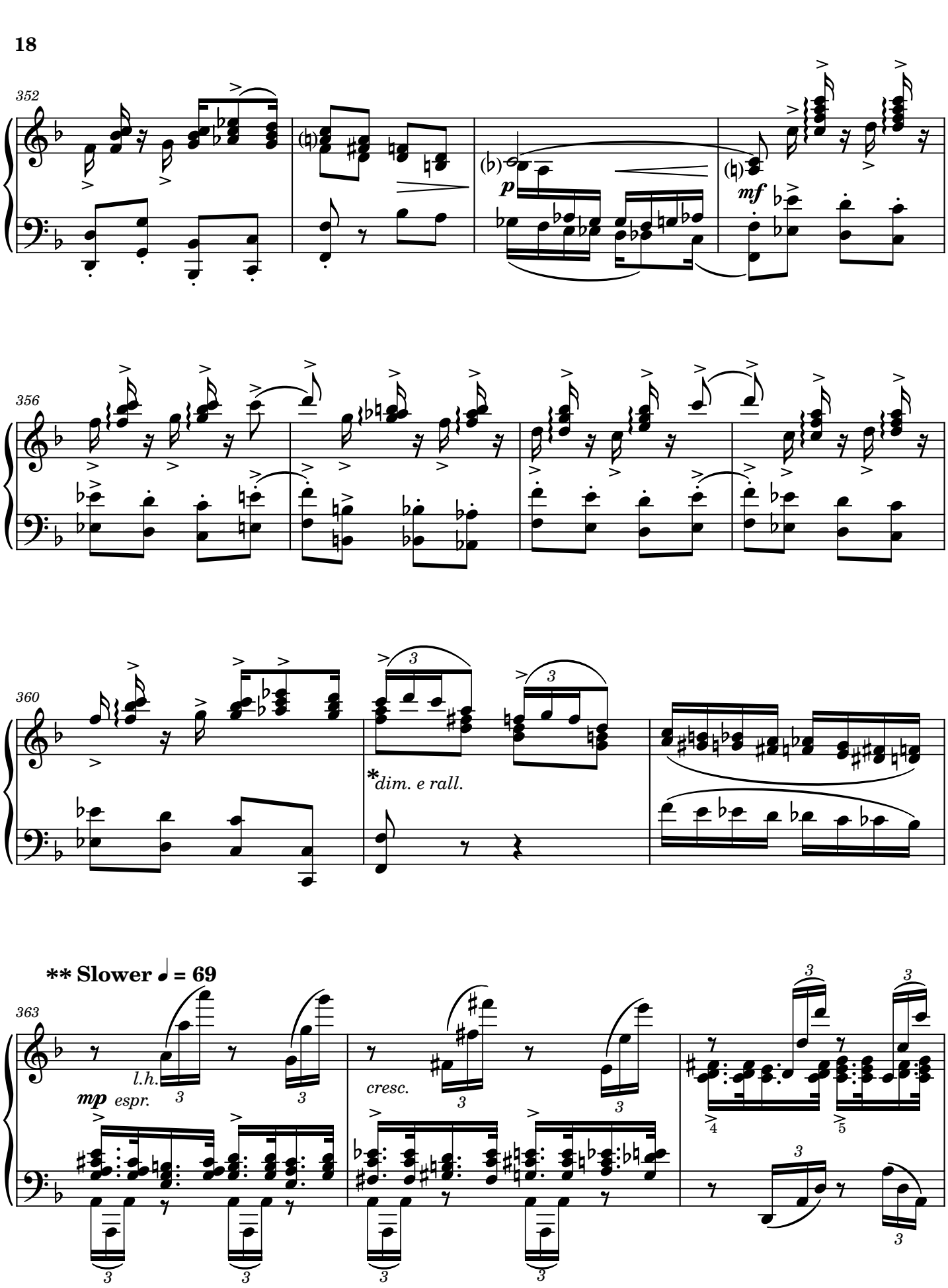
**Mezzo forte in original manuscript.

*Editor's suggestion.

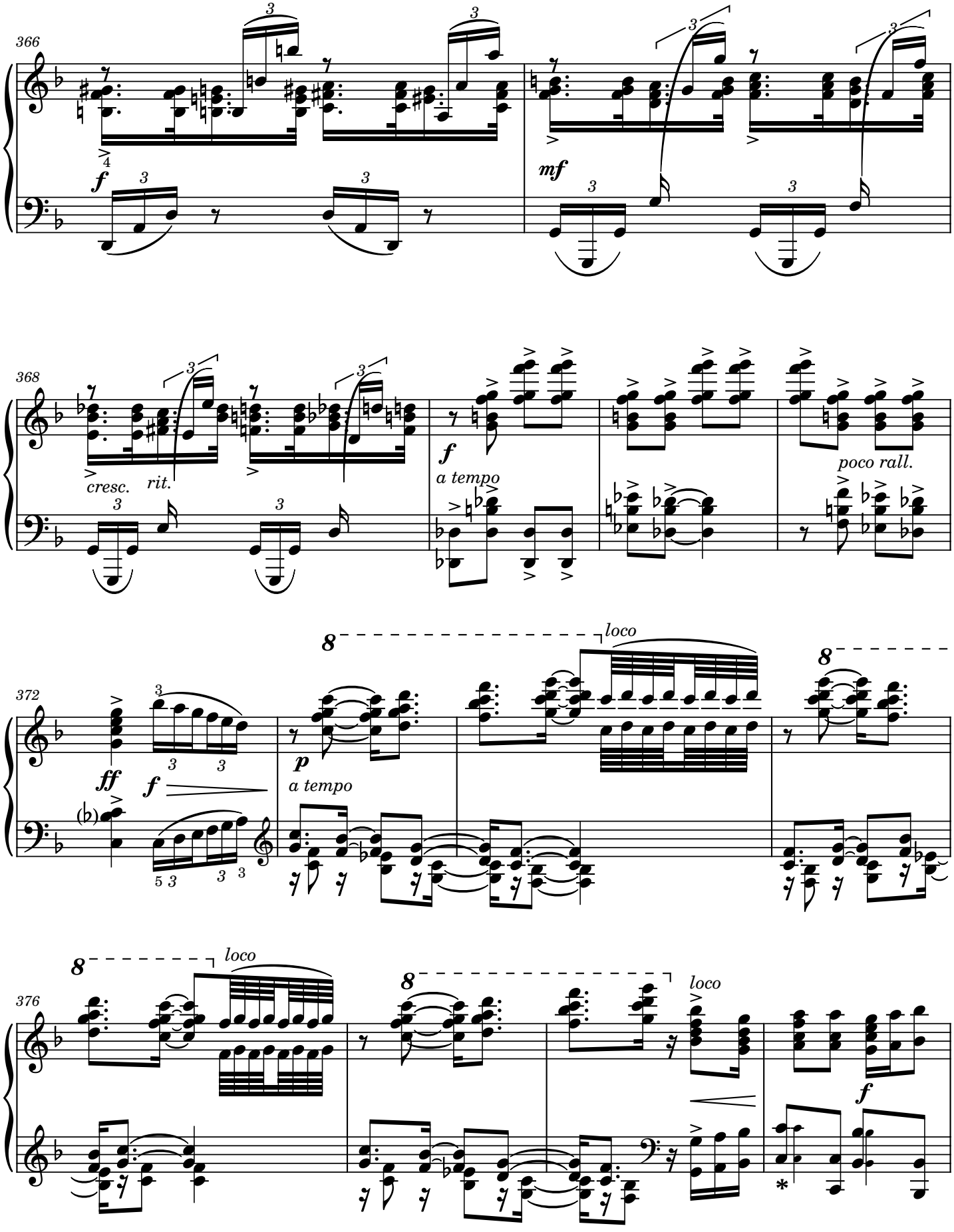
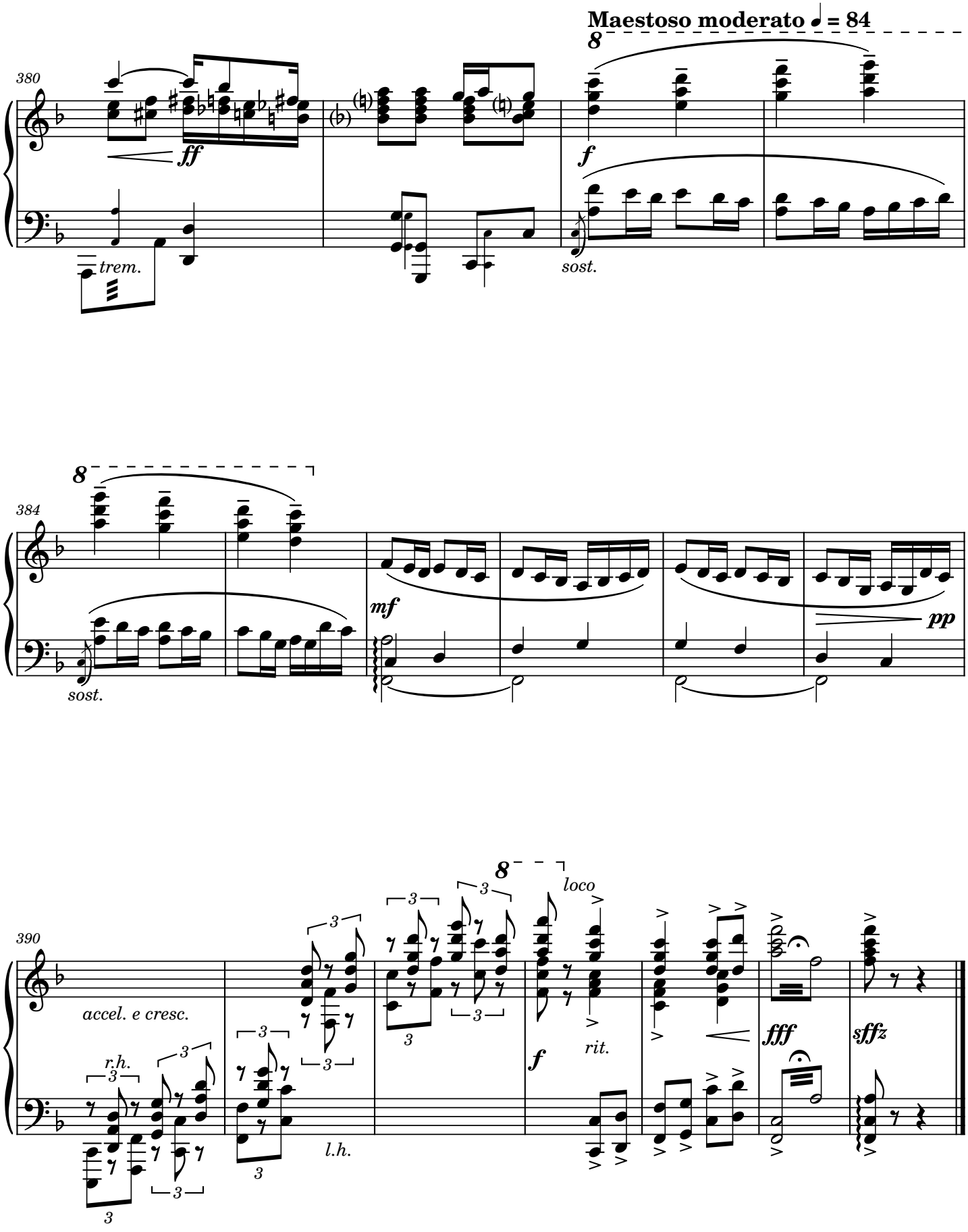
**Cresc. not in original manuscript.

*Piano in original manuscript.

**8va appears only in copyist's score and 2 piano edition.

***Piano in 2 piano edition.

*Editor's suggestion. ****Easier: reduce l.h. chords to 3 notes each or octaves only.
**Suggested tempo.
***Accents in original piano sketch only. In both 2 piano published edition and full orchestration, accents are omitted.

*Easier: Play as rolled half note.

**Opt.: Bottom notes of chords can be tied for easier performance.

***Slurs and accents are editorial suggestions.

*Editor's suggestion.

**Tempo is editor's suggestion. Actual tempo in score is still Allegro.

*Eighth notes in l.h. are editor's suggestion. Actual score uses quarter notes (displayed here in cue size).

Maestoso moderato ♩ = 84
380
ff
trem.
f
sost.
384
sost.
mf
pp
390
accel. e cresc.
r.h.
l.h.
loco
f
rit.
fff
sffz